Early intervention key

from page D2

Early intervention increases the percentage of those who can speak to make themselves understood—a crucial step towards a higher degree of independence. In 1987, 75 per cent of people with autism were non-verbal. Today, because of more early intervention programmes and better teaching techniques, the same proportion are able to make themselves understood.

However, experts estimate that a large proportion of adults with autism missed out on early intervention and are still not getting the help they need. And it all boils down to money. “Most money gets poured into early intervention. Children are cute; it is easier to canvass for them than adults, who might not be able to return much to society,” says Dr Taylor.

Money aside, much of the challenge facing the care sector revolves around the sheer complexity of treating a condition that differs from person to person.

“The autism spectrum is wide and individuals may experience different levels of severity for each of the symptoms. This means that individualized treatment is needed for each person,” says Dr Lyen.

Also, adults with autism are more of a challenge than children. They are harder to teach because many have become set in their ways and are also difficult to control. “Adults have their own routines built up over the years. That’s why it’s harder to teach them,” says Dr Lyen.

But he thinks that it is vital for services to continue into adulthood. Dr Lyen notes that adults often regress if left unsupported and may develop bad habits.

“The longer they stay without a program, the more difficult it would be for them to develop socially acceptable behaviour,” says Ms Kala Karkal, deputy director of the department for special needs at the Academy of Certified Counsellors. It is this belief that spurred her to set up the SAI-i Autism Centre, a non-profit adult facility under the Sunlove Home in Lorong Buangkok, a rehabilitative home for those with intellectual disorders that relies on public donations.

“At SAI-i, we work to maintain our clients’ skills. We are not there to equip them with new academic skills,” she says, adding that a lack of funding restricts its intake to about seven adults, cared for by just one or two workers.

Long wait for place

As far back as 2006, Mr Yeow Hon Ming and his wife set their sights on St Andrew’s Day Activity Centre (DAC) at Bedok South for their second son, Nicholas. They had to endure a “highly stressful” four years before they secured a place.

Meanwhile, they hired a maid to look after him. And Mr Yeow, 60, retired early to help out at home, while Mrs Yeow continued running their childcare business.

Their eldest son Aaron, 25, also suffers from autism, but is considered high-functioning, although he has difficulties with social skills. The son, who is currently studying at a local university, is being cared for by his parents.

Sebastian graduated with an N-level qualification from ACS (Barker). He later moved on to complete an infocomm technology course at the Institute of Technical Education.

He leaves the office at 6pm after working an eight-hour day and takes the bus home by himself—accompanied by the sounds of a drive-time radio show through his headphones.

“He doesn’t seem to have a need for friends,” says his mother.

Outside of work, Sebastian also enjoys newspaper Sudoku puzzles. His autism manifests itself mostly when he is routine is changed. He throws tantrums if the newspaper cannot be found that morning. And he was similarly unsettled when a TV rights bidding war almost thwarted his plans of catching the World Cup on television.

About his future, Ms Koh says: “There has been talk about community living for them, but no concrete plans as far as I know.

“It’s important for him to have a trust fund, but more so, a family member who will give him accommodation and keep an eye on him.

“He can make his way around, go out and buy food and bathe himself. But to live on his own, to take care of his laundry, it’s probably a bit beyond him.”